

VU Research Portal

Making public administration academic [book review essay]

Overeem, P.

published in

Public Administration
2018

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1111/padm.12405](https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12405)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

CC BY-NC-ND

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Overeem, P. (2018). Making public administration academic [book review essay]. *Public Administration*, 96(2), 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12405>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Making public administration academic

Patrick Overeem

Faculty of Social Sciences, Political Science and Public Administration, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam

Edoardo Ongaro, *Philosophy and public administration: An introduction*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2017, 288 pp., £85.00 (hb), ISBN 978 1 78471 843 5

Arthur Ringeling, *Public administration as a study of the public sphere: A normative view*, Eleven International Publishing, 2017, 322 pp., £51.94 (pb), ISBN 978 94 6236 765 4

Is public administration—the field of study, not its object—truly academic? The answer is not as obvious as it may seem. Surely, the field has acquired a permanent place at many universities, including some (but not all) of the most prestigious ones in the world. It is taught and studied at the highest possible level of complexity and technical sophistication. It also shares many attributes with other, recognized academic fields: it has its own teaching and research programmes, journals, conferences, associations, eminent thinkers, intellectual schools, doctrinal debates, and occasional polemics. It even increasingly acquires disciplinary status. Epistemological and methodological standards have been developed (constantly disputed, of course) of what counts as sound public administration knowledge and knowledge gathering. All this gives the field a well-deserved place among the social sciences.

These things alone do not, however, make a scientific field truly academic in the classical and still most meaningful sense of the word. To be academic, Josef Pieper has pointed out in his fine little book *Was heißt akademisch?* (1952), a field must be philosophical, or at least have a philosophical stream running through its veins. It must be concerned, amidst everything else it may do, with the search for the essence of its object of study, which implies an intrinsic interest in theorizing (*theorein*) and never solely in doing (*prattein*). True academics in our field thus keep asking ‘What is public administration?’ and ‘How does it relate to other ideas and phenomena?’

Understood in this sense, the academic quality of public administration becomes less clear. Much of the valuable work done seems to be driven by practical interests rather than philosophical wonder. And while a lot of theory-building takes place in accordance with the social scientific norms most students of public administration wish to follow, most of this work results in what Robert Merton in *Social Theory and Social Structure* has called ‘middle range theories’: ‘theories intermediate to the minor working hypotheses evolved in abundance during the day-by-day routine of research and the all-inclusive speculations comprising a master conceptual scheme from which it is hoped to derive a very large number of empirically observed uniformities of social behavior’ (1957, pp. 5–6). Yet such ‘all-inclusive speculations’, albeit framed differently and not necessarily aimed at empirical generalization, is basically what academic philosophy consists in. It is not difficult to see that philosophical reflection of this kind is rare in public administration—much rarer, indeed, than in other social sciences such as sociology and political science where ‘social theory’ and ‘political theory’ do have a respected place.

Given this situation, it is fortunate that in 2017 two books have appeared that aim to enrich public administration with philosophical reflection. They are written by colleagues who both have the experience and the position to

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2018 The Authors. *Public Administration* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

oversee the field of public administration as a whole. Edoardo Ongaro, an Italian-born professor of Public Management at the Open University in the UK, is currently president of the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA); Arthur Ringeling, now emeritus, served for a long time as professor of Public Administration at the Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. Their books are learned monographs which reflect on philosophical questions for our field in a serious and constructive manner. Neither of them has fallen prey to the temptations of irony, ideological critique, and 'deconstruction' that nowadays so often go by the name of philosophy. Both also offer the kind of reflection that belongs more to the Continental-European, interpretivist tradition than to the Anglo-American, analytical one. This is refreshing and allows for a wide range of perspectives and thinkers, including several from both authors' home countries. In other respects, however, the books are quite different.

A helpful tool to understand these differences is the distinction Ongaro makes at the very end of his book between three ways to relate philosophy to public administration. The first he calls 'philosophy for PA', which is 'employing philosophical speculation to enlighten facets of the study and the practice of PA and find new viewpoints on PA themes' (p. 231). Ongaro sees his own book as an example of this. The second is 'philosophy of PA': 'professional philosophers articulating their philosophical reflection into the specific field of PA' (p. 231). This, Ongaro acknowledges, only rarely happens, as most philosophers have little or no interest in public administration. Perhaps Ringeling's book (although not by a professional philosopher) comes closest to this category. Finally, there is a third approach, called 'mapping backwards from the PA field to philosophical thought', which aims to find out 'what the philosophical premises of the PA scholarship being vetted might be' (p. 231). According to Ongaro, Riccucci's 2010 book on epistemological traditions in public administration is a good example of this.

Ongaro's *Philosophy and Public Administration* aims to provide a 'systematic introduction to the theme of the philosophical issues that are foundational to PA' (p. 6). It is a truly encyclopedic work. After the introduction, two long chapters give a detailed but unavoidably eclectic summary of the entire history of Western philosophy, from the pre-Socratics to postmodernism. Ongaro bravely attempts to discuss not only the greatest philosophers, but also many more secondary ones, interrupting longer sections on Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hegel, and (surprisingly) Bergson with shorter-than-a-page discussions of Anaximander, Scotus, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Windelband, and (again surprisingly) Weber, to name but a few. The resulting overview is readable and clear enough, but its added value for others than philosophical novices remains unclear, especially since most of the thinkers and ideas discussed hardly play a role in the later argument.

The next two chapters are the core of the book. Chapter 4 discusses key themes in public administration from the viewpoint of mainly twentieth-century theoretical perspectives (Kantianism, postmodernism, critical realism, positivism, structuralism, neo-Marxism, existentialism, phenomenology and realism, historicism), metaphysical questions (time, potentiality and actuality, necessity and possibility, the status of universals), and epistemological approaches (pp. 111–52). Together, these again make for an impressive list, yet also for an impossible chapter in terms of clarity and coherence. In chapter 5, the situation is only slightly better. Here the focus shifts towards political philosophy and the distinction between the 'common good' (Plato and utilitarianism), social contract (including Rawls), and a possible third option between them (personalism and communitarianism). These are then related to various public management approaches, including New Public Management, Public Value Management, and Frederickson's New Public Administration (pp. 168–75).

In the final chapters, Ongaro continues giving overviews of approaches. In chapter 6, he presents three normative ways of thinking about public administration—virtue ethics, realism, and utopianism—by means of three artistic masterpieces: Lorenzetti's famous Sienese frescoes on good and bad government, Machiavelli's *Il Principe*, and Thomas More's *Utopia*. Chapter 7, finally, is mainly a discussion of Jos Raadschelders' well-known 'intellectual traditions' in public administration: 'relativist and post-modernist visions', 'scientific knowledge', 'practical knowledge', and 'practical wisdom'—and an attempt to relate these traditions to philosophers and ideas discussed earlier in the book.

As this summary shows, the book is more a description of existing philosophies and schools of thought than an exercise in original philosophical reflection and argumentation itself. The sheer amount of schools and thinkers is

disproportionate to the relevant insights yielded for public administration. A limitation of scope, with greater coherence and profoundness, could have made this a much better book. A welcome addition to it, however, is the postscript by Wolfgang Drechsler (pp. 235–43). Besides the customary endorsement of what precedes, he offers his own diatribe against what he aptly calls the ‘polytechnical’, non-humanistic character of much contemporary public administration and the dominance of the modernist, Western outlook in the field—a criticism that, he acknowledges, applies to Ongaro’s book as well. The bold argumentativeness of this postscript stands in refreshing contrast to Ongaro’s more descriptive, encyclopedic account.

Ringeling’s book *Public Administration as a Study of the Public Sphere* is much less about philosophy than Ongaro’s; the topics it addresses and the sources on which it draws remain much more within the realm of public administration itself. Paradoxically, however, this book is actually the more philosophical one of the two. It starts not very originally from a critique of the ‘global reform movement’ (chapter 1) and its corresponding view of ‘Public Administration as a management science’ (chapter 2). Against this view, Ringeling aims to defend a conception of public administration as ‘a culture science [Kulturwissenschaft, PO] with a normative character’ (p. 15). The body of the book is structured around the dichotomies that constitute the meaning of public administration (understood both as the field and its object) politics/administration, state/society, public/private, and normative and legal approaches/social scientific approaches (chapters 3–6). For each of these, Ringeling attempts to enrich the dominant Anglo-American and indeed global understanding of public administration with a Continental-European alternative. In his view, public administration should recognize its inherently political and public character and acknowledge the role of statehood as well as legality.

In his final chapters, Ringeling turns towards what he considers ‘the normative core’ of public administration. He appreciates, not after noting problems, the concept and doctrine of ‘good governance’ (chapter 7), but only as an ‘operationalization’ of what he really advocates as the central normative notion of the field: the concept and ideal of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* (chapter 8). For Ringeling, this is the idea into which the ideas defended in the preceding chapters culminate. It is a typically Continental-European and perhaps even Dutch idea: rather than, for instance, ‘constitutional democracy’, let alone ‘liberal democracy’, in the Netherlands the concept of ‘democratic *Rechtsstaat*’ has in recent decades become everyone’s favourite designation of the country’s regime. Ringeling conceives of the democratic *Rechtsstaat* as a construct (at times even a compromise) of various substantive and particularly procedural public values, as a way to combine societal pluralism with a limited notion of the common good (pp. 241–44). It thus upholds a public sphere in which the common life can be lived, the cultivation of which is the prime task for public administration. To understand and study this public sphere well, Ringeling argues, public administration should be understood broadly: not only as the empirical science of government, but as a ‘culture science’ with close relations to administrative practice and a broad and normative outlook (chapters 9 and 10).

This is an engaging argument and it is written with passion. A clear disadvantage of Ringeling’s book, however, and of the Continental tradition more generally, is a certain lack of conceptual and logical rigour. The result is occasionally a tendency to musing and sermonizing. Both can surely yield deeper insights and stronger motivations for action than sober argument, but they are also more difficult to track and check. A certain arbitrariness always lurks around the corner. Actually, both books arguably suffer from this disadvantage. Ongaro claims to contribute to public administration’s ‘ontology’ (pp. 111, 232) and to provide a ‘deductive’ argument (p. 111), but frankly he does nothing of the sort. In fact, his ‘argument’, like so much social scientific theorizing, consists mainly of descriptive tools such as concepts, typologies, and classifications and has little explanatory or evaluative force. The use of bigger and smaller lists in both books suggests logical order but is often hardly functional. To give one example, in his key chapter 8 on the role of (democratic) values in public administration, Ringeling treats his readers consecutively to Van Wart’s ‘five major sources of values’ (pp. 229–30), Goodsell’s ‘five different value orientations’ (pp. 230–31), and Fisher’s ‘six value clusters’ (p. 239). Without a clarification of the theoretical basis of these categorizations and their value for the overall argument, this only affects the book’s readability and the strength of its argument.

The conclusion must be that both books are serious and welcome attempts to infuse public administration with a healthy dose of philosophical reflection—the one historical and encyclopedic, the other more contemporary and

exhortative. Ringeling's book, in particular, will be an engaging read for many scholars and students of public administration. In terms of theoretical quality, however, both works leave much to be desired. Also after these books, it remains true that original philosophical reflection on public administration is scarce and much-needed. The best attempt to provide such reflection, to my knowledge, is Hodgkinson's *Towards a Philosophy of Administration* (1978)—a unique work that combines original argumentation with profound aphorisms (it is cited by Ringeling but strangely enough not by Ongaro). If public administration is to become more academic, that is to say more philosophical, it needs more books on the issues addressed by Ongaro and Ringeling, but written with the quality and style of Hodgkinson's.

REFERENCES

- Hodgkinson, C. (1978). *Towards a philosophy of administration*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Merton, R. K. (1957). *Social theory and social structure*. New York: Routledge.
- Pieper, J. (1952). *Was heißt akademisch?* München: Kösel-Verlag.

How to cite this article: Overeem P. Making public administration academic. *Public Admin.* 2018;1–4.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12405>